

Andrea Zittel

ANDREA ZITTEL was reared in Southern California in the midst of material plenty. After graduating from college, she was forced by financial constraints to live and work in a tiny



200-square-foot storefront studio. Being impoverished taught her a new kind of luxury—the luxury of being free of material possessions. Zittel stopped painting to develop a new form of art that extends this gratifying experience to others.

A to Z 1993 Living Unit, 1993
Steel, wood, and objects, 60 x 40 x 30 in. (bed)
Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

MENTAL COMPOSURE

Andrea Zittel

See colorplate 15, page 31

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STACKED ON THE SHELVES of the local supermarket are 156 varieties of coffee. Habit-forming jingles and celebrity testimonials pander to shoppers who must choose between slow roasts and instant crystals, wake-up brews and bedtime tonics, by-the-cup and by-the-pot packaging, familiar and exotic flavors, freeze-dried and fresh grounds, bargains and luxuries, drips and microwavables, filter packs and coffee bags. Most options are offered in a range of sizes and brands, all pledging the fullest satisfaction. Choosing one requires rejecting 155 possibilities, a demanding and inescapable enterprise for coffee-drinkers.

This superfluity of choices applies to painkillers (175 kinds), soda (269), cable channels (500 +), and countless forms of medical plans, investment options, magazine subscriptions, cable networks, and eyeglass frames. Options have even proliferated in careers, mates, and places of residence, all of which were once determined for the individual by family and custom. In all the ages of humankind, people have never encountered so many alternatives.

Some people revel in options, but many suffer from the stress associated with conducting the business of life amid such plenitude. Andrea Zittel's work offers salvation to those mall-shopping, Prozac-swallowing individuals whose nerves are frayed, whose sensory apparatuses are taxed, and whose mental operating systems are faltering on overload. It recognizes the ironic fact that the compulsion to accumulate material products derives from their ultimate failure to satisfy. New purchases invariably provoke disappointment. Their imperfections are perhaps intentional, since they lock consumers in a cycle of trading-up. In addressing this issue, Zittel asserts that *"we are so inundated with material weight that it finally loses its ability to anchor and satisfy."*

Anyone who yearns for simplicity, stability, and tranquility is a potential collector of Zittel's work. But don't expect to purchase a painting

that depicts a state of mental composure. Her works of art are works of life. They actually restructure their owner's daily habits, breaking the cycle of unfulfilled desires and associated anxieties. These artworks release their owners from the discomfort of craving.

For perhaps the first time in history, there are masses of people for whom the stress from excess has replaced the anxiety of deprivation. In order to redress this contemporary psychological affliction, Andrea Zittel established an agency, A to Z Administrative Services. Its function is to re-erect the discipline that crumbles under the weight of excessive arousal. Toward this end it simplifies people's lives, assuming an agenda that is as broad as the areas of clutter and the sources of confusion in daily lives. A to Z Administrative Services designs systems for sleeping, dining, cooking, writing, sewing, dressing, reading, socializing, bathing, laundering, grooming, and so forth. It structures each of these activities for people too mentally exhausted to do the organizing themselves.

Zittel scrupulously designs each activity to eliminate indecision, redundancy, and waste. For example, *A to Z Clothing* is based on the concept of reduction and layering. It can be adapted to all weather and social situations. A brochure describing a complete wardrobe for a woman lists three items: one suit "includes a jacket and either a skirt or pants"; one jumper/smock "that may be worn over other clothing both as a visual element and to provide function with pockets and holders"; one jacket/utility coat, "designed in a weight specific to the season and with enough pockets to eliminate the need for an additional pocketbook."

These items are not additions to a person's existing wardrobe. They constitute an entire wardrobe. In fact, anyone who acquires an article of clothing designed by Zittel must sign a contract promising to store or discard all other clothing of that type and to wear Zittel's garment exclusively (several identical sets can be acquired to assure cleanliness). The client's life is not only streamlined, it is actually extended by the time once lost deciding what to wear or maintaining the inventory of redundant items most people have crammed in closets and stacked on shelves. For Zittel, this demonstrates that "the most inter-

esting part of the process is the point when collectors must evaluate how one of my pieces will fit into their lives . . . what are they willing to give up or consolidate . . . Most collecting is an additive process, but to acquire one of my pieces is more often a subtractive process. The collector must go through the same process of self-evaluation to live with one of my pieces that I go through when I create them . . . much more creative for them than simply writing a check!"²

One means to relieve people of their malaise is to liberate them from as many functions as possible. Those that cannot be eliminated are streamlined. In her "Purity" exhibition in 1993, Zittel exhibited a series of prototypes designed to cleanse, feed, and comfort the human body. The *A to Z Food Group (Work in Progress)* consisted of an alternative food created by the artist—a mixture of rice, oats, lying-lying, chickpeas, black beans, pinto beans, broccoli, spinach, onions, mushrooms, bell peppers, carrots, sunflower seeds, and pumpkin seeds. Instead of a traditional museum label, this art object was accompanied by the following statement: "The complex nutritional needs of our bodies are virtually impossible to satisfy and can lead to an exhausting preparatory process and overly cluttered region in the home. The A-Z Food Group is designed to be perfectly balanced and at the same time to have an appealing taste. It may be eaten dried, or cooked into soups, loaves or patties. It is the healthful solution for liberation from catering to our bodies' demands."

Eating is not the only function of the alimentary canal that received Zittel's attention in this exhibition. She also displayed *Chamber Pot*, a spun aluminum vessel 5½ inches high and 9½ inches in diameter. Its accompanying statement promises that "The A-Z Chamber Pot provides freedom from the tyranny of bodily necessity. Attractive enough to set on your shelf, it is also portable enough to be easily transported to any location."

A to Z's approach to such elemental needs reverses the pattern of most merchandisers. It pares down and seeks perfection. In the process, it revives the modernist dictum that inspired the social and artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century: "less is more" returns as a healing mantra, an antidote to consumer excess.

Although Zittel's relationship to the concept of perfection has varied over time, it offers a key strategy for restoring mental composure. A perfect object eliminates the urge to acquire another. When Zittel strives to exceed excellence and attain perfection, she counters the compulsion to return to the marketplace. Perfection is the best defense against continuous decision-making and object-accumulating. It certainly conserves psychological and physical energy.

Perfection, however, is a troublesome, even tragic notion. It implies universal and eternal truth, a concept that has been discredited by postmodernist thinkers. Even Zittel recognizes its futility. Yet she seems to prefer idealistic ambition to realistic cynicism: *"I accept the fact that I will ALWAYS be seeking perfection . . . If we could just find that perfect solution we would be cured . . . of what, I am not sure, but we still look for our fix!"*³

The Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, where the artist presents her work, functions in the manner of a showroom displaying prototypes of her life-organizing products. Annual shows are mounted to present the newest and best versions of her designs. If and when perfection of an object is achieved, it will be mass-produced and distributed through normal merchandising outlets—perhaps Kmart and Wal-Marts—at moderate cost. Meanwhile, the prototypes command high prices as artworks. The price covers the cost of research, design, and manufacture of the prototypes. Zittel herself doesn't need to earn much since her living style is stripped of superfluities. It is reported that she owns one winter outfit and one summer outfit and has lived with her pets in a space that is a mere 200 feet square.

While visionaries of the past typically applied a panoramic view to social planning by issuing sweeping resolutions, Zittel's perspective is focused and domestic. Her solutions enter



ANDREA ZITTEL

Dress, Fall/Winter, designed to accommodate all Fall/Winter wardrobe requirements, 1993
Wool and satin with leather suspenders, 44 1/4 x 46 3/4 in.
(plus suspenders)

Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
Photo: Peter Muscato

society by addressing the ordinary requirements of individuals. Yet her purpose is no less heroic than that of her predecessors. *"Mine is a small social vision, not grand like in the early twentieth century. As small as a single utensil. Something*

fect bowl, a multipurpose piece of furniture, a textile, and a perfect pet.

The perfect bowl will be fabricated in spun copper, which won't break like ceramic, or crack like wood. It will be the perfect size and shape to satisfy every imaginable containing function. It will hold liquids and solids that are thick or thin, hot or cold, heavy or light. It will stack for spacesaving storage. At the same time, it will be beautiful. Owners of this bowl will never again need to decide which bowl to use, nor will they ever be tempted to acquire another.

The perfect piece of furniture must be attractive, affordable, and ultimately adaptable. Its height will be adjustable: at 18 inches, it serves as a couch or a bed, at 30 inches it is a desk or a table, at 36 inches it becomes a counter or television stand. All furniture requirements will be satisfied with this single design. No other furniture is required.

The perfect-textile is infinitely multipurpose, allowing its owner to dispose of every blanket, cover, coat, tent, tablecloth, carpet, sleeping bag, and curtain. Made of velvet and wool on the outside, linen or cotton on the inside, it is light, durable, and warm. Patterned in wide, alternating bands of black and gray, it is also beautiful.

The perfect pet, like any collectible, must please its owner aesthetically and psychologically. Through an elaborate breeding procedure, Zittel is "sculpting" the perfect pet Bantam chicken, which will then be stabilized to establish a new, identifiable, standard breed. Birds are selected in pursuit of an end-product that is quiet, clean, bright, obedient, good-natured, healthy, strong, good-looking, affectionate, and loyal. A to Z Administrative Services has undertaken the ultimate creative act; it is fashioning a new form of life: *"In the post-*



ANDREA ZITTEL
Breeding Stock—Silver Sebright, 1992
Bantam chicken
Courtesy Andrea Rosen
Gallery, New York

we take for granted. I create something that has a widespread application. But it is still elitist. This is inevitable because I am a

fine artist. The object will carry my image. It will have a long time span. By making household objects, mundane objects, I can still immortalize myself. So much art exists in storage." Among the household items she has proposed are a per-

industrial society, there is a breakdown of class structure. The elite transferred their desire for exclusivity to their desire for purebred pets. Pure lines are the same thing that define royalty in people. Establishing a definition of purity reveals a longing to identify with an ideal. The new breed will be my creation. When my perfect bantam chicken is produced and it reproduces, my art will be available in an unlimited edition."

Breeding chickens demanded architectural habitats capable of organizing the activities of the birds and fostering reproduction among the most worthy specimens. These chicken-breeding units generated a new body of work—habitats for humans. In her most comprehensive work to date, Zittel supervises the client's mental state by designing an entire living unit. Her goal is to "liberate the user from an overwhelming barrage of decisions and responsibilities by consolidating all living needs into a small organized living unit."⁵

A to Z architectural units are not merely efficient. They are conditioning boxes where people can recover from the stress of confronting too many options. Models for living an orderly existence necessarily circumscribe individual freedom. As Zittel recognizes, "My design would allow for each individual to self-impose a discipline . . . My architectural models are representative of this kind of conditioning . . . The agency [A to Z] designs programs in order to reorganize and simplify its clients' living conditions—it provides them with a discipline they could not impose on themselves—it creates the missing guidelines. It is really interesting to find that the imposition of these structures on people makes them feel more relaxed, more in control."⁶

Measuring 60 by 30 by 40 inches, Zittel's 1993 *Living Unit* is small enough to be totally portable. Its hinged steel framework can be folded shut when it is not in use, or opened and arranged in various configurations to accommodate the inhabitant's individual requirements. It is outfitted to provide all the ingredients of a functional house—kitchen, office, closet, folding cot, and two folding stools. This meticulously designed domestic nucleus boasts the ultimate in mobility, simplicity, and efficiency.

The 1995 *Comfort Units* exhibited at that year's Whitney Biennial offered several improvements. The mobility of three roll-up service

carts—one for dining, one for office work, and one for washing—allows people to pursue these functions in any location. According to the brochure, "you never have to leave bed." An improved pillow "transforms once uncontrollable excess into comfort and support" by using the owner's clothing as its filling. The interiors themselves were aesthetically enriched with red corduroy upholstery, blue scalloped dishes, and white mugs. Videos shown with each *Comfort Unit* either projected abstract images or displayed simple activities such as washing hands. In every case, the rhythms of the images were unhurried and the soundtracks were ultimately soothing.

The reader may ask why Zittel is an artist and not a craftsperson. Zittel produces attractive, functional pots, furniture, and clothes, etc., yet these objects are not the end products of her efforts. Her output is defined by the mental composure these objects induce.

Since Zittel liberates minds, spares purses, and conserves energy, why is she an artist and not an efficiency expert? Zittel's interest in minimizing input and maximizing output is less a matter of conserving material resources than psychological ones. She strives to redeem wasted energy by offering satisfaction and thereby eliminating desire.

Why is Zittel an artist and not a dictator? Contentment lies somewhere between too much freedom and too much regulation. Zittel occupies this murky territory, hoping to avoid the debilitating effects of too many choices on the one side, while steering clear of fascistic impositions of control on the other. She entices people to try new formats in their lives, but she does not impose her solution upon them. "My work is for those who need guidance. For people who need me, I will serve."

Why is Zittel an artist and not a commodity manufacturer? Western lifestyles are predominantly orchestrated by the narrow interests of product designers, advertising executives, marketers, and manufacturers. Their decisions have two by-products. One is avowed—they generate profit. The other is implicit—they influence the psychological states of their customers. In contrast, Zittel makes the well-being of the

consumer the primary goal of her domestic blueprints. Her conviction that the environment is largely responsible for determining behavior is paired with skepticism regarding the benefits provided by today's marketplace. Thus, she refers to her work as a "therapy," a "ministry," a "cure."

Why is Zittel an artist and not a therapist? Her efforts become art because they are not targeted solely at individuals. When her works are mass-produced, the ease they generate will filter through the populace. "My outcome? It is changing society. This outcome requires my inserting myself into society however subtly, having an effect, improving people's lives, changing consciousness. The artist has a moral responsibility to society. Originally, this function was associated with pleasure or religion. Now the artist's function is even more heightened."⁸ Thus, bowls, coats, food, and pillows become works of fine art when they are made with the intention of conveying social truth, psychological insights, and/or uplifting solutions. Andrea Zittel's commodities accomplish all three. In suggesting that being a consumer is linked with feelings of anguish, confusion, and dissatisfaction, they offer us an opportunity to regain composure.

Zittel's promotion of the benefits of simplicity seems to be infiltrating popular culture through more conventional routes as well. In 1996, the book *Chic Simple* was published and marketed as "Essential reading for those who want to pare life down to the elegant basics." The "pared down life" it cultivated offered "100 coordinated outfits" and "over 150 delicious simple recipes," hardly matching Zittel's standards of simplicity. Perhaps the new profession of "life coach" provides a closer parallel. Coaches are family therapists, business consultants, financial advisers, household managers, and friends all in one. For fees ranging from \$75 to \$250 an hour, they keep their clients focused on issues essential to their happiness.

Zittel recognizes that the privileged status of the artist is accompanied by social accountability. "The artist today exists in a less restricted position than any other type of producer (i.e., architect, fashion designer, industrial designer who all must answer to many authorities including the consumer). I am interested in experimentation and

testing ways of reorganizing our lives and redefining our relationships with our possessions that perhaps those in a more restricted position could not do."⁹ The functions she addresses within her enterprise are those that are tied to necessity. They are mundane and unavoidable. She does not volunteer to write our poems for us, sing our songs, or arrange our flowers. Indeed, her work seeks to bolster our reserves of time, money, and energy so that our own creative potential can be revitalized. "The artist is the authority, the designer of life. Her goal is mental. To produce a psychological state . . . Psychologically, I free you up, liberate you, free your mind. I give you a small nucleus of harmony. You are calmer, more relaxed, peaceful."¹⁰

ZITTEL POSTSCRIPT:

Amazing discrepancies sometimes exist between an artist's intentions and an audience's responses. Andres Serrano, for instance, contends that he did not set out to lose friends and irritate people when he submerged a figurine of Christ in urine. Carolee Schneemann reports that she did not anticipate the scandal caused by her student depictions of a naked man, a fellow student. Orlan does not wish to disgust viewers when she displays documentations of her surgeries. Likewise, although this essay contains numerous quotes by Andrea Zittel, she advises readers to resist the conclusions they infer. "I realize that some confusion may stem from the fact that when I talk about my work I really become an extension of it. My subjectivity is (an) important means of exploring or understanding my ideas . . . however I realize I am not the best person to talk to about the work on a more objective level."¹¹